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McWilliams

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(54) **FLEXIBLE TARPAULIN SUPPORT DEVICE**

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B62D 33/04	(2006.01)
B60P 7/04	(2006.01)
B62D 27/02	(2006.01)
B62D 29/04	(2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC ***B62D 33/044*** (2013.01); ***B60P 7/04*** (2013.01); ***B62D 27/02*** (2013.01); ***B62D 29/04*** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC B62D 33/044; B62D 27/02; B62D 29/04; B60P 7/04
USPC 296/100.18
See application file for complete search history.

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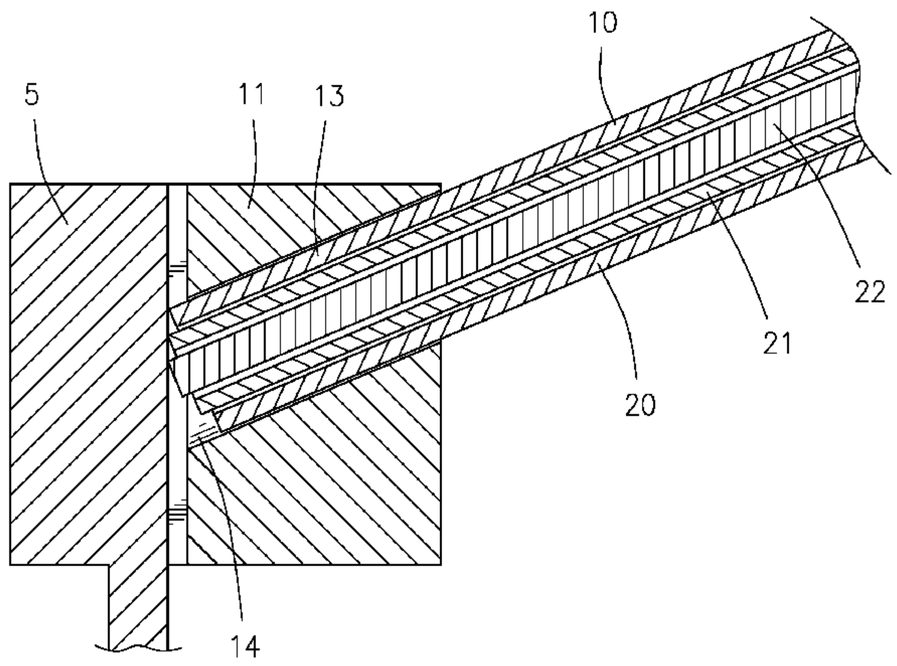
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A tarpaulin support device for an open top of a trailer or vehicle. The device has a flexible and resilient tube assembly bowed from a normally straight position under tension to an arched position outwardly from the trailer or vehicle. The tube assembly may be removably mounted to the side walls of the trailer or vehicle via brackets with angled bores therethrough. The tube assembly comprises an outer tube, an inner tube located substantially within an outer tube, a rod located substantially within an outer tube, or a rod located substantially within an inner tube located substantially within an outer tube.

8 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



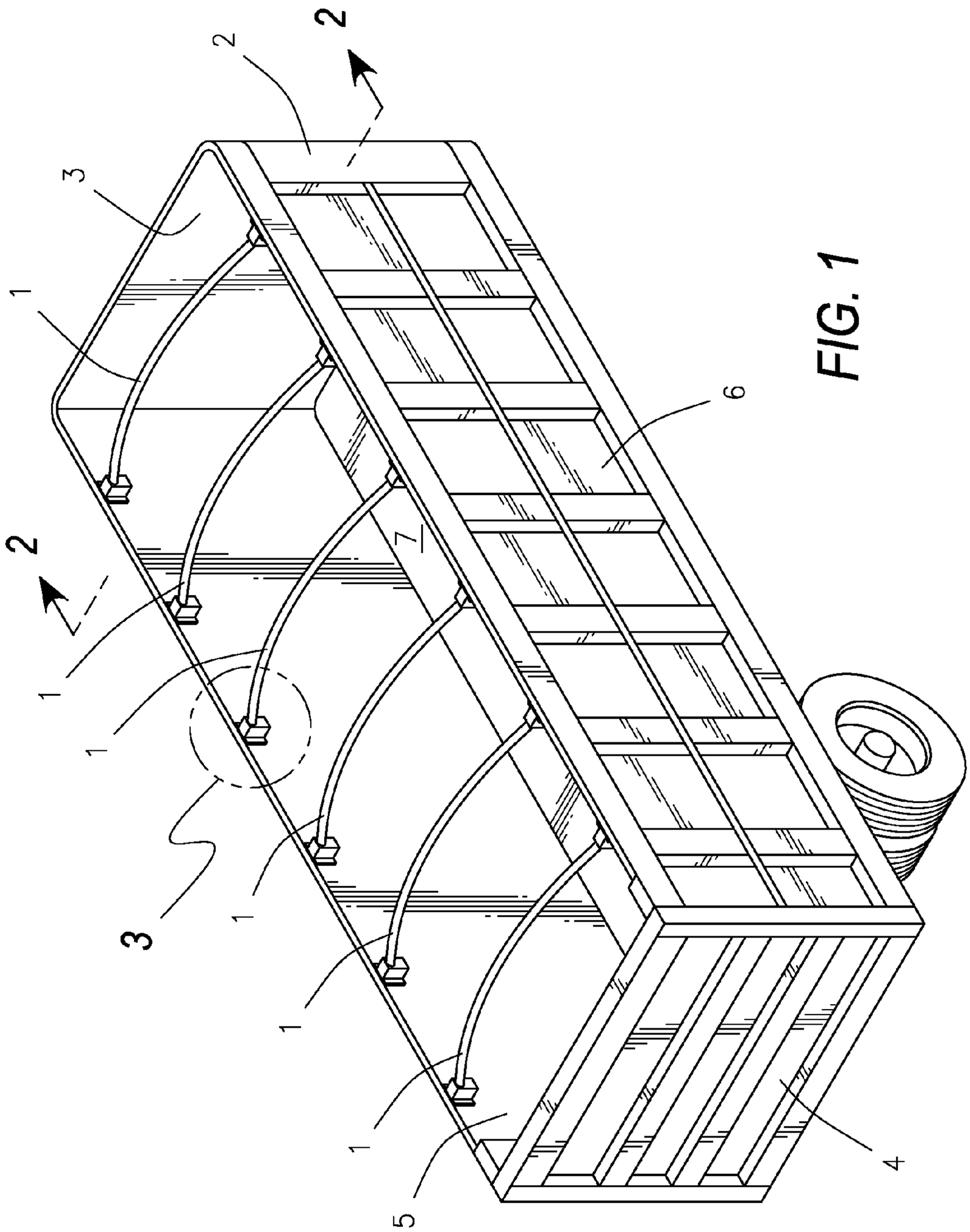


FIG. 1

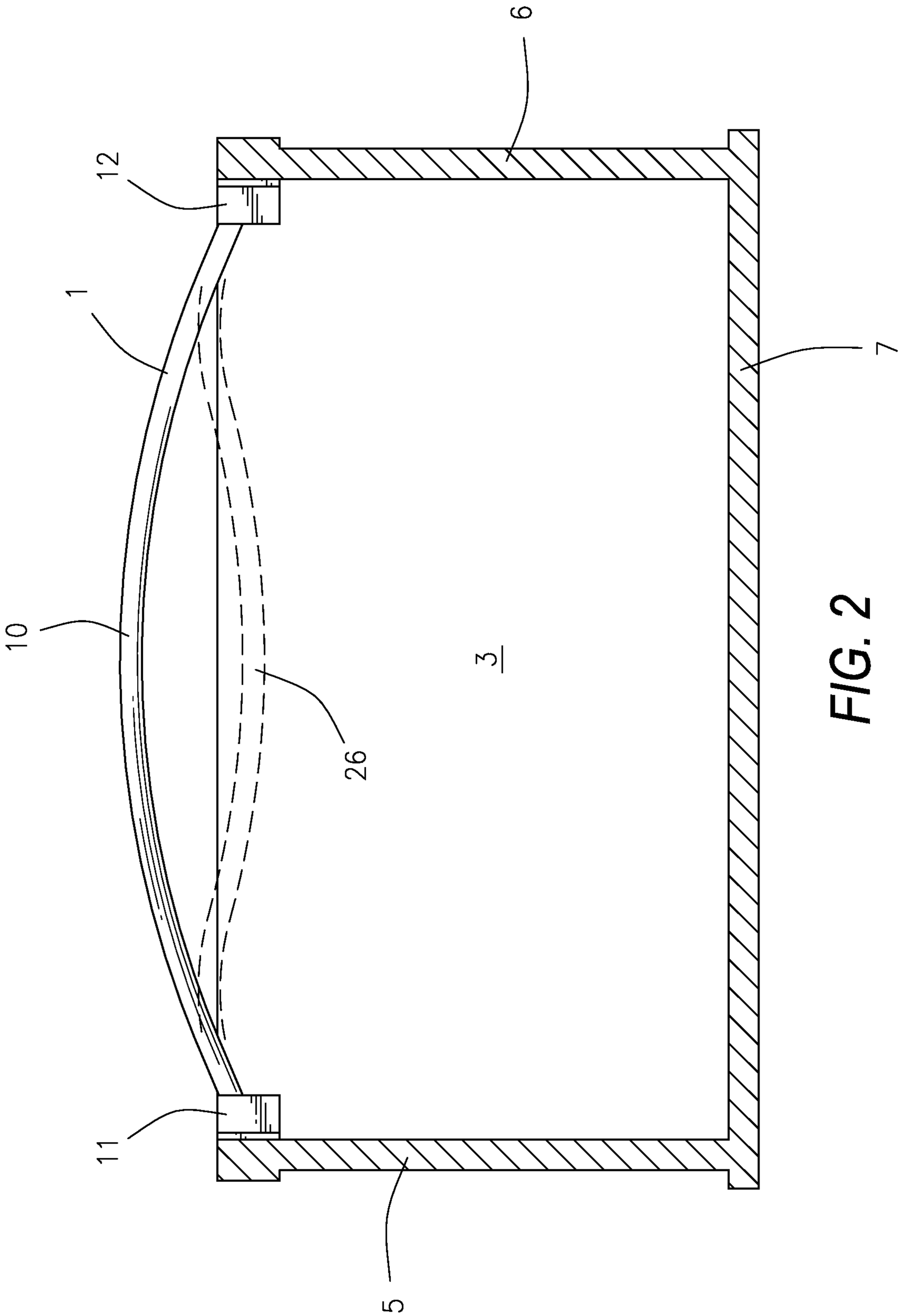


FIG. 2

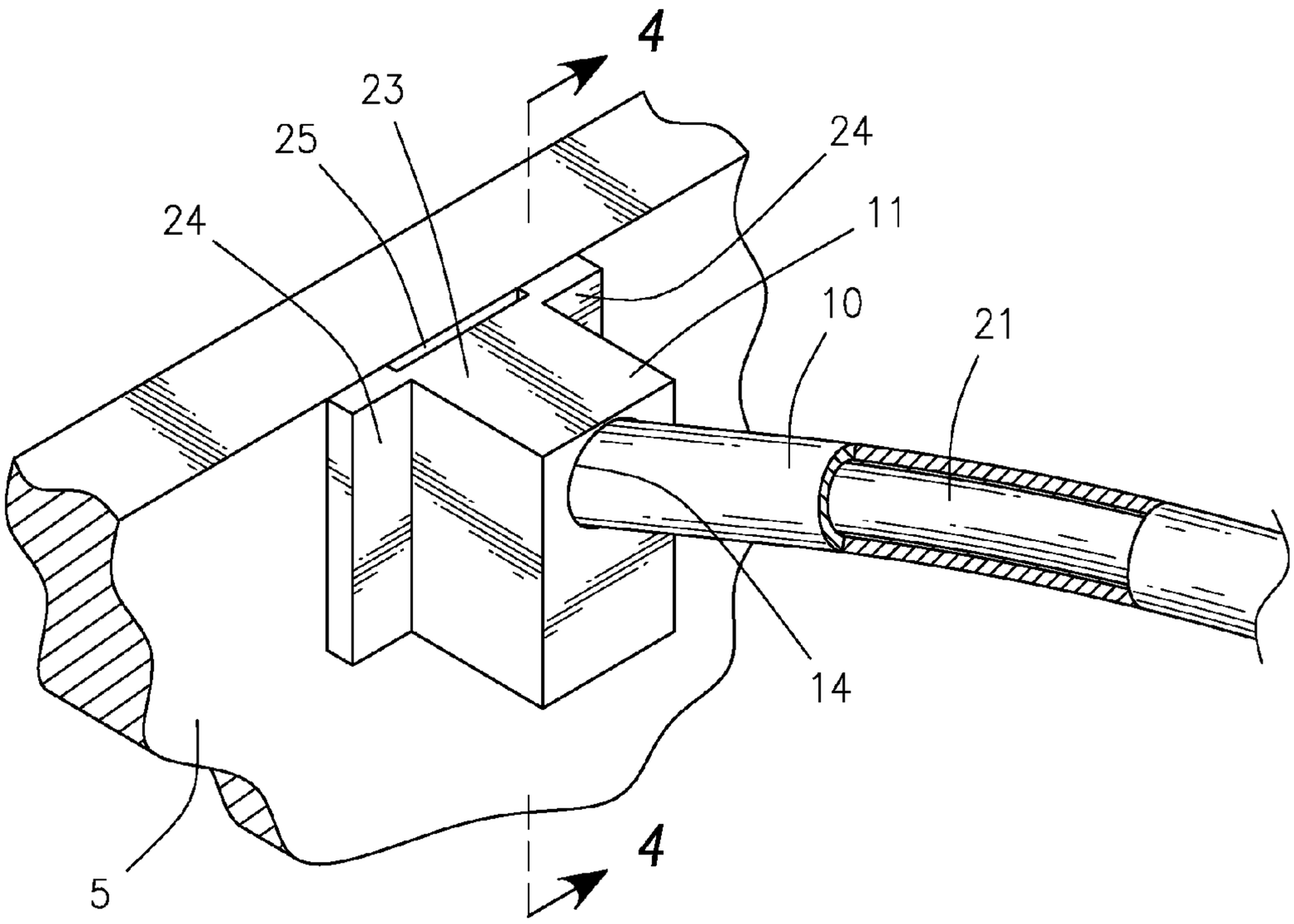


FIG. 3

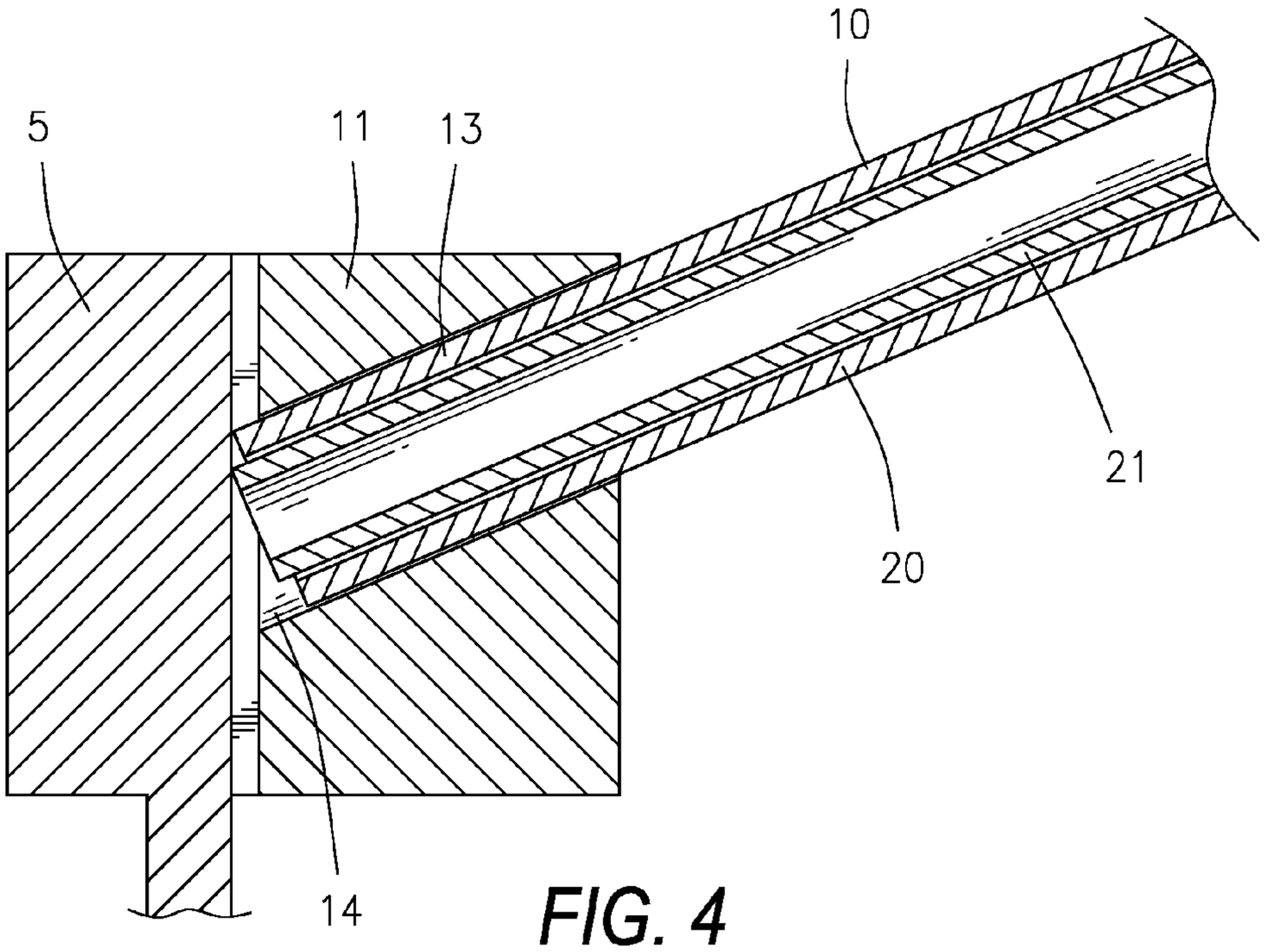


FIG. 4

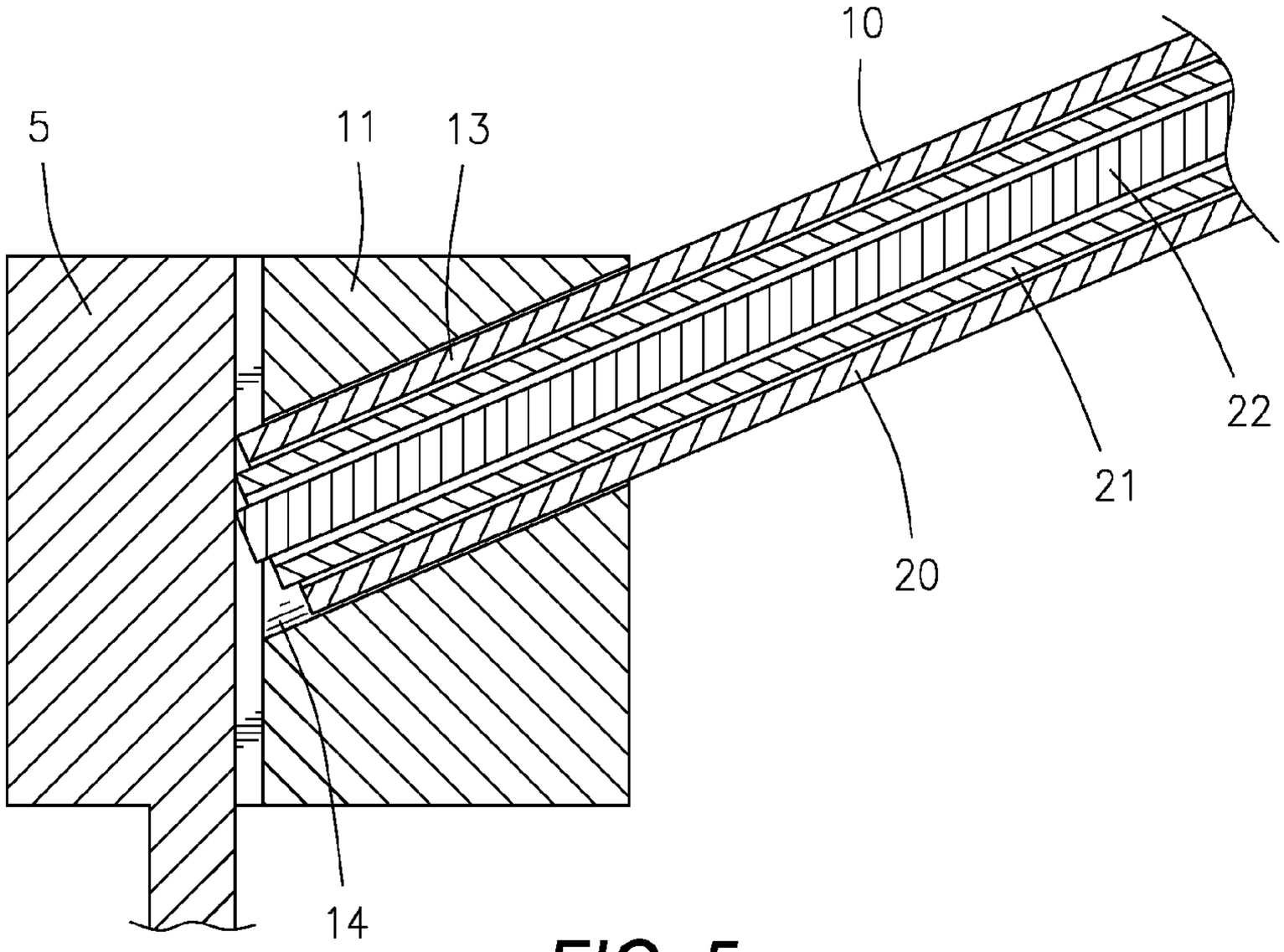


FIG. 5

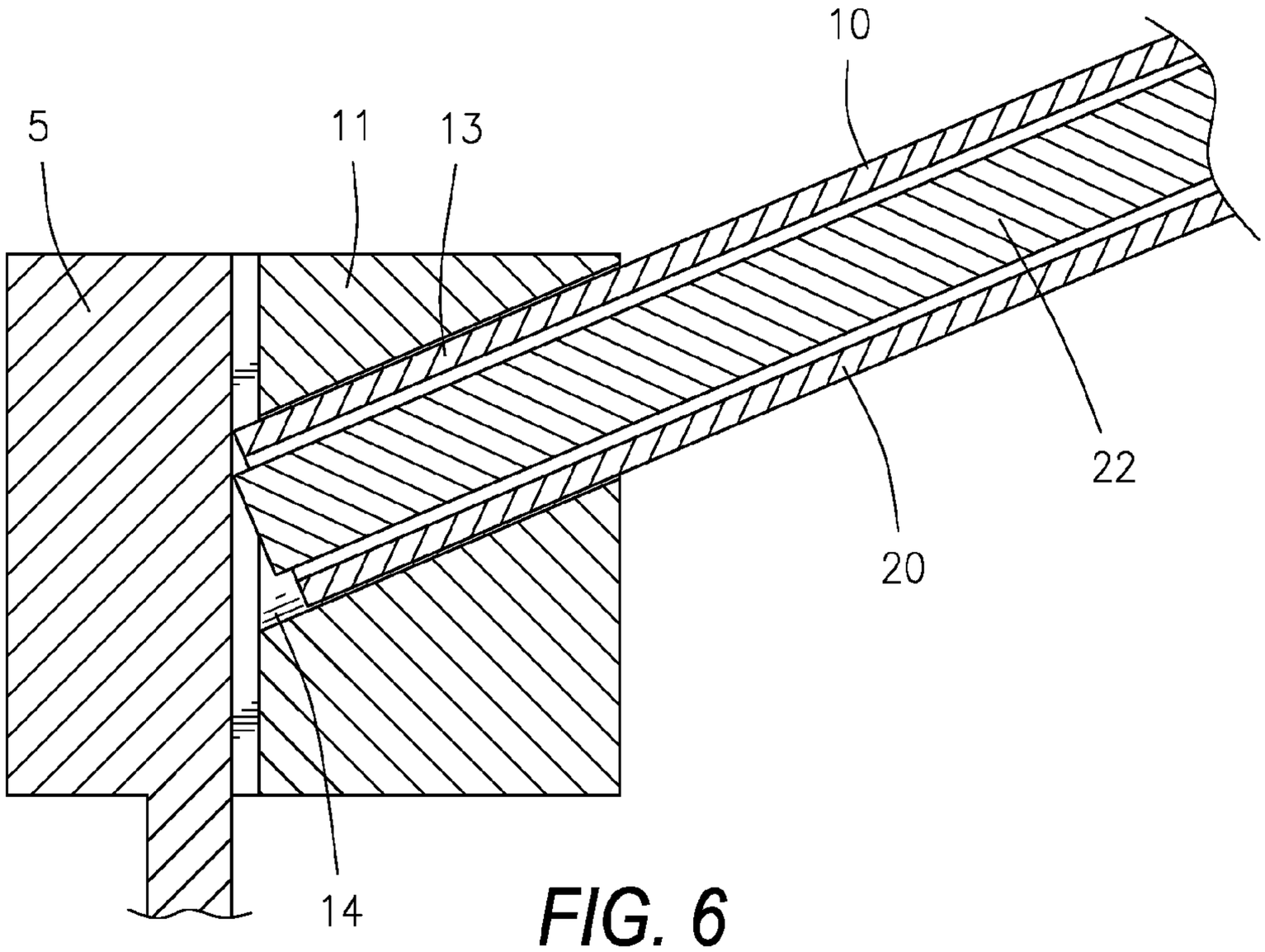


FIG. 6

FLEXIBLE TARPAULIN SUPPORT DEVICE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Cross Reference

Not Applicable.

1. Field of the Invention

This invention relates generally to a tarpaulin support device for semi-trailers, and more particularly, but not by way of limitation, to a tarp bow that is flexible and has more than one layer.

2. Description of the Related Art

As noted in Stephens et al., U.S. Pat. No. 5,664,824, incorporated by reference herein, tractor trailers used to haul loose material, such as sand and gravel, will often employ a tarpaulin cover over the open top of the trailer having a bottom and a pair of opposed side walls. The tarpaulin discourages any of the loose material from falling or being blown off during transportation. A series of curved bows extending laterally across the open top form a support for the tarpaulin. Use of a tarpaulin which is arched at the center provides a number of advantages. Rainwater will run off of the load more easily. Additionally, the arched center accommodates high loads. In the case of sand and gravel, loading of these materials is often preceded by removal of the bows in order to avoid damage. Loading of these materials through the open top will often dent, twit, and break the support bows.

Stephens et al. solves this problem by making the bow flexible. Specifically, Stephens et al. teaches a tarpaulin support device for an open top of a trailer, vehicle, or the like, where the device includes a flexible and resilient pole made of nylon composite which, although sturdy, is both flexible and resilient. The pole is normally straight but, when installed, bows outwardly away from the floor of the trailer. The pole will flex and deflect if sand, gravel, or other materials impact the pole during loading operations or in the event of impact from an end loader or other loading equipment used during the loading operation. Thus, the pole may be kept in place during loading of the trailer.

The pole of Stephens et al. is mounted to the trailer via opposing brackets, where each bracket is attached to the trailer and each has a non-cylindrical opening therein. A first socket and a second socket each have a receptacle to receive one of the pole ends, each socket terminating in a non-cylindrical post receivable in one of the openings to retain the sockets and retain the pole and to prevent radial movement of the pole.

Despite its many advantages, there are certain drawbacks to the Stephens et al. device. Notably, the nylon of the pole tends to become rough through use, causing the tarpaulin to wear and eventually tear. Additionally, the nylon tends to crack in both cold and heat. The nylon pole can be costly to replace, particularly considering the fact that a single trailer requires multiple poles. Another drawback of the Stephens et al. device is that, over time, it tends to cause the walls of the trailer to deflect outward.

Based on the foregoing, it is desirable to provide a flexible bow that provides the advantage of the Stephens et al. pole without the drawbacks stated above.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In general, in a first aspect, the invention relates to a tarpaulin support device for an open top of a trailer or vehicle, the device comprising a flexible and resilient tube assembly having a first end and a second end. The tube assembly is normally straight but is bowed under tension to an arched position outwardly from the trailer or vehicle. The tarpaulin support device may further comprise a first bracket and a second opposed bracket, each bracket attached to the trailer or vehicle and having a bore therethrough to receive either the first end or the second end of the tube assembly to retain the tube assembly in the arched position. Each bore may extend at an upward angle from the trailer or vehicle, thus facilitating the arched position of the tube assembly outwardly from the trailer or vehicle. The tube assembly may comprise an outer tube, an inner tube located substantially within an outer tube, a rod located substantially within an outer tube, or a rod located substantially within an inner tube located substantially within an outer tube. The outer tube may be made of PVC; the inner tube, if present, may be made of PVC; and the rod, if present, may be made of nylon composite or other non-metallic material. The outer tube may be freeze resistant, UV resistant, or both freeze resistant and UV resistant. The outer tube may be longer than the inner tube and/or the rod, if present.

In a second aspect, the invention relates to a tarpaulin support device for a trailer or vehicle having a bottom, an open top, a first side wall, and a second opposed side wall, the device comprising a flexible and resilient tube assembly having a first end and a second end, the tube assembly bowed from a normally straight position under tension to an arched position outwardly from the trailer or vehicle. The device further comprises a first bracket attached to the first side wall, where the first bracket has a bore therethrough in which the first end of the tube assembly is receivable, and a second bracket attached to the second side wall, where the second bracket has a bore therethrough in which the second end of the tube assembly is receivable, such that the brackets allow axial movement of the tube assembly in the bores to retain the tube assembly in the arched position. Each bore may extend at an upward angle from the side wall, thus facilitating the arched position of the tube assembly outwardly from the trailer or vehicle. The tube assembly may comprise an outer tube, an inner tube located substantially within an outer tube, a rod located substantially within an outer tube, or a rod located substantially within an inner tube located substantially within an outer tube. The outer tube may be longer than the inner tube and/or the rod, if present.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a perspective view of a semi-trailer with multiple flexible tarpaulin support devices installed thereon;

FIG. **2** is a sectional view taken along section line **2-2**;

FIG. **3** is a partial, cutaway view of the flexible tarpaulin support device;

FIG. **4** is a sectional view taken along section line **4-4**, where the flexible tarpaulin support device has a two-tube configuration;

FIG. **5** is a sectional view of the flexible tarpaulin support device with a two-tube-plus-rod configuration; and

FIG. **6** is a sectional view of the flexible tarpaulin support device with a tube-plus-rod configuration.

Other advantages and features will be apparent from the following description and from the claims.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The devices and methods discussed herein are merely illustrative of specific manners in which to make and use this invention and are not to be interpreted as limiting in scope.

While the devices and methods have been described with a certain degree of particularity, it is to be noted that many modifications may be made in the details of the construction and the arrangement of the devices and components without departing from the spirit and scope of this disclosure. It is understood that the devices and methods are not limited to the embodiments set forth herein for purposes of exemplification.

In general, in a first aspect, the invention relates to a tarpaulin support device **1**, as shown in the Figures. As seen in FIG. **1**, one or more of the tarpaulin support devices **1** may be used on a semi-trailer **2** or other vehicle. The trailer **2** may include a front end wall **3**; an opposed rear end **4** which may include a removable or swinging gate that may be closed during loading and transportation and open for unloading; a pair of opposed side walls **5** and **6**; and a floor **7**. The trailer **2** may have an open top, which may be covered by a tarpaulin after the trailer **2** has been loaded with sand, gravel, or other material to discourage any of the loose material from falling or being blown off during transportation.

Each tarpaulin support device **1** may comprise a tube assembly **10** extending laterally across the open top, as seen in FIGS. **1** and **2**. The tube assembly **10** may have a circular cross section, or any other desired cross section, with a hollow center. The tube assembly **10** may be normally straight. When installed, the tube assembly **10** may be bowed outwardly away from the floor **7** of the trailer **2**. By exerting force, the tube assembly **10** may be moved from its normally straight condition to the arched position for use; when the force is released, the tube assembly **10** may return to its straight condition.

As seen in FIGS. **3** and **4**, the tarpaulin support device **1** may further comprise a first bracket **11** and a second bracket **12**, where the tube assembly **10** has two opposing ends **13** and where one of the ends **13** is receivable in the first bracket **11** and the other end **13** is receivable in the second bracket **12**. Specifically, each bracket **11** and **12** may have a cylindrical bore **14** therethrough to receive the ends **13** of the tube assembly **10**. It will be understood that other non-cylindrical configurations of the tube assembly **10** and bore **14** might be employed with the same results.

The tube assembly **10** may not be permanently affixed in the brackets **11** and **12**. To insert, ends **13** the tube assembly **10** may be moved axially into the bores **14** of the brackets **11** and **12**.

Each of the first brackets **11** may be attached to the side wall **5** of the trailer **2**, while each of the second brackets **12** may be attached to the side wall **6** of the trailer **2**. The brackets **11** and **12** may be welded or otherwise secured to the side walls **5** and **6**. Each of the brackets **11** and **12** may be arranged so that its bore **14** angles downward toward the side wall **5** or **6** to which the bracket **11** or **12** is attached, as seen in FIGS. **4** through **6**, facilitating the upward arch of the tube assembly **10**. When multiple tarpaulin support devices **1** are used on a trailer **2**, the bores **14** of each of the first brackets **11** may be parallel to each other, while the bores **14** of each of the second brackets **12** may be parallel to each other.

The tube assembly **10** may comprise one or more one or more substantially concentric tubes, which may or may not surround a rod. For example, the tube assembly **10** may comprise an outer tube **20** surrounding an inner tube **21**, as seen in FIG. **4**. As seen in FIG. **5**, the tube assembly **10** may comprise an outer tube **20** surrounding an inner tube **21**, which in turn surrounds a rod **22**. FIG. **6** shows the tube assembly **10** comprising an outer tube **20** surrounding a rod **22**. Any number of tubes, with or without a rod, may be included in the tube assembly and remain within the scope of the invention. The inner tube **21**, if present, may have a smaller outer diameter than the inner diameter of the outer tube **20**. Likewise, the rod **22**, if present may have a smaller diameter than the inner diameter of the outer tube **20**. If both the rod **22** and the inner tube **21** are present, the rod **22** may have a smaller diameter than the inner diameter of the inner tube **21**.

The length of the tube assembly **10** may be longer than the distance between the first bracket **11** and the second bracket **12** as installed or, alternately stated, longer than the distance between side wall **5** and side wall **6** at the location at which the brackets **11** and **12** are or will be installed. Accordingly, the tube assembly **10** may be under tension when bowed. If an inner tube **21** or a rod **22** is included in the tube assembly **10**, it may optionally be shorter than the outer tube **20**. This is because the arch of the inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** may be different than that of the outer tube **20** due to their concentric nature, which causes the inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** to protrude from the ends of the outer tube **20** when arched if they are the same length. The inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** may be completely or substantially completely interior to the outer tube **21**, such that the inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** is completely or substantially completely covered by the outer tube **21**. The inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** may substantially the same length as the outer tube **21**, such that the tube assembly **10** may have multiple layers at all points along its length. The outer tube **20**, inner tube **21** if present, rod **22** if present, and any additional tubes if present may all be concentric when in their straight condition.

The outer tube **20**, as well as inner tube **21** and any additional tubes, if they are present, may be made of PVC pipe which, although sturdy, is both flexible and resilient. In particular, the tubes may be made of Schedule 80 PVC, which is freeze-resistant. The outer tube **20** may be made of UV-resistant material or, additionally or alternately, may be coated in a UV-resistant coating. The rod **22**, if it is present, may be made of nylon or other non-metallic material. The rod **22** may likewise be sturdy, flexible, and resilient.

Brackets **11** and **12** may comprise a body **23** with the bore **14** extending therethrough and one or more legs **24** extending from the body **23**. The body **23** may attach to side wall **5** or **6** via the legs **24**. The legs **24** may be spaced such that a gap **25** is formed between the side wall **5** or **6** and at least a portion of the body **23**, as shown in FIG. **3**. The gap **25** may be located adjacent the bore **14** such that the tube assembly **10** may extend through the bore **14** and terminate at least partially in the gap **25**, as shown in FIGS. **4**, **5**, and **6**.

It has been found that the tarpaulin support device **1** and, in particular, the tube assembly **10** will flex and deflect if sand, gravel, or other materials impact the tube assembly **10** during the loading operation. The tube assembly **10** may also flex and deflect in the event of impact from an end loader or other loading equipment used during the loading operation. Such deflection is shown in dashed lines **26** on FIG. **2**.

The outer tube **20** may protect the inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** from damage, wear, UV exposure, color fading, etc., as well as insulating the inner tube **21** and/or rod **22** from extreme temperatures. The nylon pole of Stephens et al. is prone to cracking when exposed to UV radiation and cannot withstand freezing temperatures. Thus, it must be removed when temperatures drop too low and must be replaced regularly. Furthermore, the nylon tends to get rough with use, causing wear in the tarp. In the present invention, the nylon rod **22** may not need to be replaced as often due to the protection offered by the outer tube **20**. When the outer tube **20** becomes worn or damaged, it may be replaced without

replacing the inner tube **21** and/or rod **22**. This may reduce the cost of use of the flexible support device over that of Stephens et al. The initial cost may likewise be lower due to the fact that less nylon may be used in the present invention. The brackets of the present invention may offer similar savings over Stephens et al. as they are simpler due to the fact that no socket is needed to prevent the tube assembly **10** from rotating, unlike the pole of Stephens et al. Finally, it has been found that the tarpaulin support device **1** does not cause the walls of the trailer **2** to deform in the way the Stephens et al. device does.

Whereas, the devices and methods have been described in relation to the drawings and claims, it should be understood that other and further modifications, apart from those shown or suggested herein, may be made within the spirit and scope of this invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A tarpaulin support device for an open top of a trailer or vehicle, the device comprising:

a flexible and resilient tube assembly having a first end and a second end, where the tube assembly comprises an outer tube, where the outer tube comprises PVC pipe, and:

an inner tube located substantially within the outer tube, where the outer tube is at least as long as the inner tube and where the outer tube and the inner tube are substantially concentric;

a rod located substantially within the outer tube, where the outer tube is at least as long as the rod and the outer tube and the rod are substantially concentric; or

a rod located substantially within an inner tube located substantially within the outer tube, where the outer tube is at least as long as inner tube and the rod and where the outer tube, the inner tube, and the rod are substantially concentric; and

a first bracket and a second opposed bracket, each bracket attached to the trailer or vehicle and having a bore therethrough to receive either the first end or the second end of the tube assembly to retain the tube assembly in an arched position.

2. The tarpaulin support device of claim **1** where each bore extends at an upward angle from the trailer or vehicle, thus facilitating the arched position of the tube assembly outwardly from the trailer or vehicle.

3. The tarpaulin support device of claim **1** where the outer tube is made of PVC; the inner tube is made of PVC; and the rod is made of nylon composite or other non-metallic material.

4. The tarpaulin support device of claim **1** where the outer tube is freeze resistant, UV resistant, or both freeze resistant and UV resistant.

5. The tarpaulin support device of claim **1** where the outer tube is longer than the inner tube and/or the rod.

6. A tarpaulin support device for a trailer or vehicle, the trailer or vehicle having a bottom, an open top, a first side wall, and a second opposed side wall, the device comprising:

a flexible and resilient tube assembly having a first end and a second end, where the tube assembly comprises an outer tube, where the outer tube comprises PVC pipe, and:

an inner tube located substantially within the outer tube, where the outer tube is at least as long as the inner tube and where the outer tube and the inner tube are substantially concentric;

a rod located substantially within the outer tube, where the outer tube is at least as long as the rod and the outer tube and the rod are substantially concentric; or

a rod located substantially within an inner tube located substantially within the outer tube, where the outer tube is at least as long as inner tube and the rod and where the outer tube, the inner tube, and the rod are substantially concentric,

where the tube assembly is capable of being arched;

a first bracket attached to the first side wall, where the first bracket has a bore therethrough in which the first end of the tube assembly is receivable; and

a second bracket attached to the second side wall, where the second bracket has a bore therethrough in which the second end of the tube assembly is receivable,

such that the brackets allow axial movement of the tube assembly in the bores to retain the tube assembly in an arched position.

7. The tarpaulin support device of claim **6** where the bore in the first bracket extends at an upward angle from the first side wall and the bore in the second bracket extends at an upward angle from the second side wall, thus facilitating the arched position of the tube assembly outwardly from the trailer or vehicle.

8. The tarpaulin support device of claim **6** where the outer tube is longer than the inner tube and/or the rod.

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